

## Hidden History, Revealed Landmarks

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An old hamburger stand symbolizing the gluttonous appetite of the automobile, the American consumer, and corporate buccaneers. The sterile stylings of a dead and discredited architect. A carnival city representing the worst in American values, sprawl and crime.

These hardly sound like promising candidates for historic preservation. Add to these flaws ephemeral materials, outdated uses and academic controversy, and these three examples look even less likely to be included on anyone's landmark list. But the oldest existing McDonald's (1953), Edward Durell Stone's Stuart Pharmaceutical Factory (1958), and the Las Vegas Strip (1941-present) are cutting-edge examples of the future of preservation. Each is a paradigm of the paradoxes historic preservation must face and resolve--soon.

Of the three, Stuart Pharmaceutical in Pasadena is the nearest to a traditional historic landmark. It is an early and pivotal work by an architect renowned in his time. It is also less than fifty years old, and is currently threatened by the efforts of the building's owner, Johnson and Johnson, to sell the property. Yet Stone, who died in 1978, is rarely discussed today, let alone recognized as an important architect. He was controversial in his time and proudly so, diluting (so his critics would say) the pristine clarity of International Style modernism with historic references and gaudy ornament. Buildings like the District of Columbia's Kennedy Center and Chicago's Standard Oil Building seem thin, pompous and showy. Since his death architecture has travelled in different directions, and there has been no major retrospective of his work, no major book on his career, no effort to bring his buildings into the mainstream of architectural discussion except in the most dismissive manner.

Yet he was a major influence on design of the 1950s and 1960s, founding with Minoru Yamasaki and Phillip Johnson the Neo-Classic stylings that helped break Bauhaus Modernism's clammy grasp on American architecture. Plum commissions fell to him, such as the 1954 United States Embassy in New Delhi, the 1958 US Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair, and what would become the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. He eclipsed even his friend Frank Lloyd Wright as one of the best known of American architects and appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1958.

Stuart Pharmaceutical was an early example also of a noted architect designing a suburban factory. Stone placed it on a commercial strip and related its landscaping, its employee recreational facilities, its lines and materials to the burgeoning car-oriented suburban culture of the period. His trademark screen walls, white on white forms, and pencil slim golden columns form an aesthetic foreign to the 1990s, but we must look beyond current taste if we are to identify and begin preserving the landmarks of the future. An award-winning building at a formative point in Stone's evolution should be landmark fodder.

That is what Pasadena Heritage believed in nominating it--successfully--to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. The ground has been broken for Edward Durell Stone. But the real challenge is how preservation organizations, academics, and communities across the country will respond not only to Stone buildings, but to the entire range of 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s styles which, like Stone's NeoClassicism, are not popular, respected or even recognized today. Lever House and the Seagrams building weren't the only architecture of the 1950s. There was the Corporate Modern style seen in Pereira and Luckman's Union Oil Building in Los Angeles. There was the Late Moderne of Paul Williams' Los Angeles County Courthouse. There was the Neo-Formalism of Lincoln Center. There was Disneyland. There are all the city halls, community colleges, upscale restaurants, car dealerships and other buildings that spread these styles and made them part of our general landscape. We have a lot of catch-up work just to document and understand these styles. Only then can we systematically evaluate which examples are significant and worth preserving. Stuart Pharmaceutical is only the tip of the iceberg.

But a major commercial building by a name brand architect, no matter how tarnished the reputation, is an easy call compared to a small roadside food stand by an unheralded commercial architect. Add to that the

fact that the building design was a prototype, repeated in over a thousand examples nationwide, and it is even more difficult to establish landmark importance.

Clearly, though, the oldest remaining McDonald's represents fundamental shifts in American lifestyles and the massive influence those lifestyles forced on the shape, form, and look of the American city. We are talking about the automobile city, born in the teens and twenties, but truly reshaping the city in the post-world War II economic boom. Perhaps only the far-flung freeway system itself equals the significance of this one McDonald's in representing these changes.

The oldest McDonald's challenges architectural historians and preservationists to update their ways of looking at buildings. Railroad stations, of course, have long been honored as important civic and cultural buildings. They helped to establish downtown centers. They were designed as public monuments, usually in the prevailing Beaux Arts style of the early twentieth century. By nature they were sizable buildings in major cities, the symbol of centralization of tracks, transportation, urban growth, and corporate wealth.

But in the latter half of the twentieth century, decentralization was the key to urban design, thanks to the car. The transportation monuments of that period necessarily reflect that fact. Instead of one massive building in the center of town, dozens of smaller buildings--like this McDonald's stand--performed the same function of servicing the main mode of transportation, providing for the comfort of drivers and passengers, as well as giving form to the new city. A single McDonald's is not as impressive a structure as Grand Central Station, but the network, the web it spread over the landscape, is in many ways even more impressive.

It teaches us that we must look and think about the city--and its formative monuments--in new ways. For example, it suggests that historic districts be seen as networks, not just a few contiguous blocks.

Today cities may be changing drastically in form, but not in function. A city is still a place for people to gather, whether it is in a courthouse square or at the mall. It is a place for entertainment, whether at a Greek amphitheater, a Broadway theater or a cineplex. It is a place to exchange gossip, whether at the Main Street cafe or the Hardee's on the commercial strip. City hall, the workplace, schools, shops--all are traditional urban functions taking on untraditional forms in the cybercity. When we look for those new forms, we are on the track to discovering the landmarks that will have meaning for the future.

Clearly, the oldest McDonald's, in Downey, California, is a major landmark. It was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. Yet it continues to be a major preservation struggle. It was closed in January 1994. McDonald's Corporation, which owned the franchise, claimed it was a victim of the January 17 earthquake, but would not allow city officials inside to confirm this. The fact is that McDonald's was looking for a way to shut it down.

That fact is contrary to common sense. Many laypeople can see the incredible value built into this perfectly preserved image from 1953. It is a symbol of our youth, of good times, of the 1950s, which is fast becoming as popular a decade in the public consciousness, in terms of architecture, music, clothing styles and decorative arts, as the Gay '90s or the Roaring '20s. McDonald's Corporation owns a national icon the equal of Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and the 1959 Cadillac tailfin. There is no logical commercial reason to throw it away.

And in fact McDonald's Corporation is well aware of its value. In 1994 they introduced a new prototype stand with drive-up and walk up service. It's called the McDonald's Classic, and, with its dual arches, canted windows and red and white tile trim, it is an homage to the Downey stand. It is however, a clumsy imitation compared to the svelte original they are trying to demolish.

The illogical reason that McDonald's is turning its back on the Downey stand is this: the two men who owned the franchise from its opening in 1953 until they sold it to McDonald's Corporation in 1992 never paid franchise fees for local advertising and other elements. Their contract with the McDonald brothers, signed before Ray Kroc had even heard of McDonald's, waived those fees. But the hierarchy of McDonald's Corporation as it evolved later always harbored a resentment of the Downey stand. So they do not want it to remain as a landmark.

This curious vendetta may rob the United States of one of its most significant buildings of the second half of the twentieth century. The battle to save it goes on; the Los Angeles Conservancy and the City of Downey are still fighting for it. In 1994 it was named to the National Trust's list of the eleven most-endangered buildings in the nation. More and more, like the citizens of Downey, preservationists will face international corporations with headquarters and interests far from local concerns.

But if it is becoming obvious to many that this individual building is worth saving, it raises wide-ranging implications that need to be addressed. If this building is valuable, what about other buildings of its ilk? Which drive-in movies, which motels should be saved as well? Many of these roadside buildings were purposely ephemeral, built to exploit a fad, an economic opportunity, or a site. What happens when the conditions that caused it change? Their flashy colors and gaudy shapes were the product of roadside laissez-faire, the opportunistic commercial vernacular design processes that exploited fringe districts where codes were lax, outside the influence or regard of serious urban planning oversight. Would planners have had the right to stop such marginal buildings in the first place? When that same laissez faire process dictates the demolition of such buildings, do preservationists have the right to step in and stop it? It seems ironic to do so. Yet do such buildings play a role in the mix of styles, building types and uses that make up a vibrant urban district? Yes.

All of these issues coalesce in the largest and most complex challenge to the preservation of roadside monuments, the Las Vegas Strip. It offers the clearest exposition of the problems and the opportunities in grappling with these preservation issues. The commercial strip is the dominant urban form of the last fifty years. Las Vegas is the ultimate commercial strip, where abundant money and a single-minded recreational purpose allowed its vernacular planning, signage, and aesthetic forces to blossom to a remarkable extent. Here can be seen both the squalid destruction and the transcendent genius of commercial vernacular architecture.

The Las Vegas Strip demonstrates the larger significance of the roadside as an urban form. It displays the evolution of the building as a sign, reported by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). From malls to Wal-Marts to office parks, it is an architectural device widely used today. A history of Las Vegas gives us an opportunity to see where it comes from and why it evolved. The concept of a building as a sign (or a sign as a building) did not always exist.

In the 1930s, Fremont Street, the traditional Main Street of Las Vegas, did not look significantly different from the Main Streets of any Midwestern or Western town. Vertical vane signs, perpendicular to the building facade and sketched in neon, were the norm.

Over the next ten years, though, we see something happening to the Las Vegas signs: there are more of them. The competition between casinos and clubs is expressed in larger and larger signs--though still of the traditional vane form. The final version of this line of sign development is seen in the seventy-foot Las Vegas Club sign (circa 1948).

But we also see innovations that expand the concept of the sign. Vegas Vic, a sixty-foot neon cowboy, was built in 1953 by the Young Electric Sign Company. His lineage can be traced directly to the roadside tradition of giant oranges, giant hotdogs, giant hats--mundane objects made special and effective through a surreal increase in scale, but owing precious little to Magritte, Dah, or even Oldenburg. Las Vegas is developing here its own easy sense of scale fitting to the car-oriented city.

Another sign innovation emerged in 1957 with the Mint casino on Fremont Street. For the first time, signage--the neon, its steel frame structure and its image--took over the entire front of a building. It was the first true sign-as building in Las Vegas. But it was followed the next year by an even more spectacular example, designed by the same sign artist from Young Electric Sign Company, Kermit Wayne: the 216-foot long Stardust sign, which constituted for all intents and purposes the architecture of the building. The casino was housed in a concrete tilt-up structure, much like a warehouse. But the facade that gave the building presence, visibility and meaning was all sign. It was even bigger than the Mint, to match the scale of the commercial strip. This strategy proved so effective that it was repeated on the Golden Nugget on Fremont Street, where the entire facade was covered in sweeping, flashing neon. Out of such confections came the iconic images of Las Vegas and important urban design strategies seen in cities across the nation.

The innovation did not stop. The next step occurred on the Strip in the 1960s. In the space of three short years were built the Great Signs for which Las Vegas became known worldwide. The Stardust, the Dunes, the Frontier, the Aladdin, Caesars, the Flamingo--these immense signs, reaching 150, 180, 220 feet into the sky, dominated the Strip's lowrise skyline. Their color, fantasy, and animation made them memorable and popular. They defined the classic period of the Las Vegas Strip, as documented in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Most have disappeared, and yet they remain emblazoned in the minds' eyes of millions of people as the image of Las Vegas.

The signs also attracted the attention of the high art community to this new urban form. Tom Wolfe wrote about the signs and their designers in 1964. The Stardust was featured on the cover of *Art in America* in 1972. Like the Monadnock, Reliance and Wainwright buildings seventy years before, the Stardust, Aladdin, and Dunes epitomized the architecture of the commercial city of their era.

The cultural and architectural significance of these signs, and of the Strip that produced them, is indisputable. Should they be preserved? Yes, for two reasons.

One, they have urban value. They define space, they create memorable images, they focus urban activity. They do all the things that courthouse domes, church spires and tree-lined boulevards did in a nineteenth-century city. Even though in today's highrise Las Vegas they no longer dominate the desert skyline as they once did, they are still important.

Two, the signs are invaluable three-dimensional documentation of a new type of city. Their value is not simply nostalgia. The Las Vegas Strip is an exaggerated example of the kind of city we see more and more at the fringes of traditional cities. Built on the skeleton of the old linear lowrise car-oriented suburbs, they are urbanizing suburbs, with highrises, high-density population, varied uses. Whether they are called edge cities, or urban villages, they are now the cutting edge of urban America. They have only recently been defined. We don't really know, generally, what they are. We need to know where they came from and how they developed. Las Vegas is an indispensable case study. And its historic architecture provides the raw data for that study.

This knowledge is crucial if we are to understand and positively direct this new urban form. Yet most of what we know about Las Vegas, for the best known example, is wrong.

How many people believe that the first Strip hotel was the Flamingo? Wrong--there were two thriving luxury hotels on the Strip before it was opened in 1946. The pattern had already been set. How many people believe that Las Vegas was conceived by mobster Bugsy Siegel? Wrong--it is an example of commercial vernacular design raised to the urban scale, the result of hundreds of decisions by dozens of individual hotel operators, entrepreneurs, commercial architects, and sign artists. Reyner Banham called it a collective work of art. How many people believe that Las Vegas mirrored the resort architecture of Miami? Wrong--the architects, architectural forms, styles and car-oriented designs came from Los Angeles, which itself had perfected the car-oriented city.

These are examples of how myth has overtaken fact. And the facts are critical knowledge today in understanding the direction of the American city. The buildings and signs of Las Vegas are invaluable data. Yet many of the most important are already gone: the 1947 Flamingo hotel room wing was demolished in 1993, the same year that the Dunes sign and tower went down in a blaze of infamy. The grand Golden Nugget and Mint signs have disappeared from Fremont Street. And the 1969 Landmark Hotel is the next scheduled to go, to be replaced by a Convention Bureau parking lot. It also played a role in the evolution of the sign into building, echoing the shapeliness and height of the contemporary great signs. Talk of a Las Vegas sign museum continues, but so does the pressure to build larger and tear down the old.

So from the work of well-known but questionable architects (like Edward Durell Stone) to vernacular hamburger stands and roadside ephemera (like the Downey McDonald's) to entire urban districts built according to rules of planning and design developed outside the establishment academies (like the Las Vegas Strip), we have a lot to look out for in the future.

The examples are not obvious. We must look for them carefully, even if they are beneath our noses, so much a part of the fabric of life that they are not noticed as significant. We must train ourselves to see

beyond the boundaries of current taste. And then we must do the basic legwork of historic preservation: who designed them? When? Why? What did they look like originally? What other examples are they related to? Very little of this has been done for such vernacular monuments. But it is absolutely necessary if we are to make cogent arguments to planning commissions, historical societies, and the public.

It will be worth it. There is a hidden history to our landscape that has barely been told. Let me end with one thread with a tremendous impact. A Los Angeles architect named Wayne McAllister designed a marvelous series of streamline modern drive-in restaurants in the 1930s. Though not the first, they were undoubtedly the most sophisticated, powerful and successful, outclassing anything on the East Coast and even the car-oriented designs of Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe or Richard Neutra. Working with him in the 1930s was Stanley Meston, who in 1952 designed the next generation of roadside architecture, the original McDonald's. Between the two, the commercial drive-in vernacular becomes something more than fluke designs of untrained designers. The drive-in becomes an architectural tradition, an ongoing style, a canon that is as much a part of American culture as the Gothic campus, the Federal-style house, or the Beaux Arts civic center. Add to this the fact that Wayne McAllister also designed El Rancho Vegas, the prototype luxury hotel and casino on the Las Vegas Strip, the one that set the pattern for a new type of city. From this information, and more to be discovered, arises the demand for nothing less than a revision of our architectural histories to account for these popular and commercial architectural expressions. There is a hidden history that deserves and demands exploration.

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